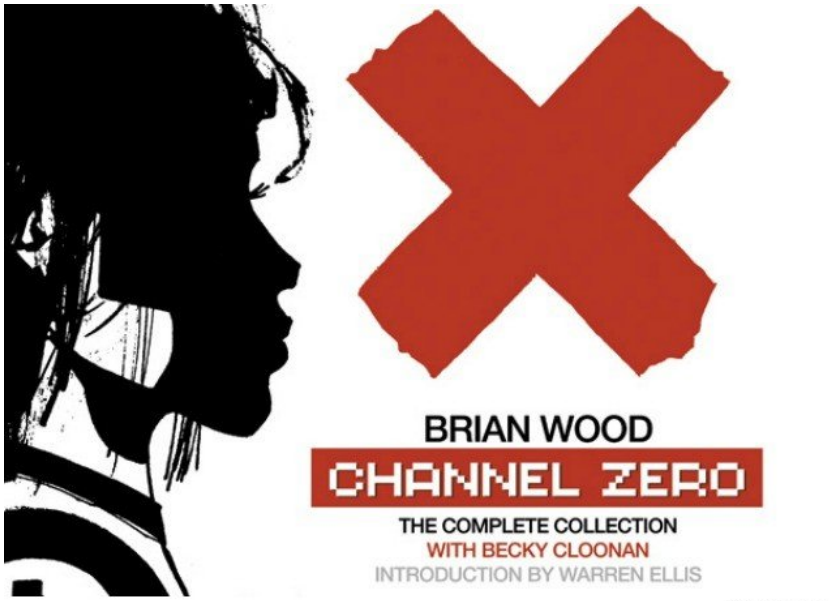
COMICS ALLIANCE

BRIAN WOOD'S 'CHANNEL ZERO': THE UNOFFICIAL BIBLE OF COMICS ACTIVISM

by John R. Parker May 30, 2012 2:00 PM



Becky Cloonan

When Dark Horse's ***Channel Zero: The Complete Collection*** lands on the shelves todays, it may introduce some Brian Wood fans to work they were unaware of before. Collecting *Channel Zero*, his first work in the medium, *Jennie One*, the sequel with another then-newcomer, Becky Cloonan, and material from volumes 1 and 2 of *Public Domain*, Wood's photography and design books, the collection presents the earliest work of one of the medium's most unique voices. Politically aware, socially conscious, and highly motivated, Wood has long maintained his activist streak through comics like *DMZ*, *Local*, and *The Massive*. For those who were there for the beginning, they can't help but be reminded of what it seemed to represent: the potential for change.Before comics activism had a name, it was just something to do. At a time in the late '90s when it seemed like comics may have been dying, when great books were being cancelled left and right, when the overall readership seemed to plummet every month, it was a convenient security blanket for the passionate and frustrated to hold onto. It required thought, demanded action, and provided an outlet for creative expression — even if you couldn't make comics, you could still make people read them, or make them better. Maybe. Actually, *big maybe*.

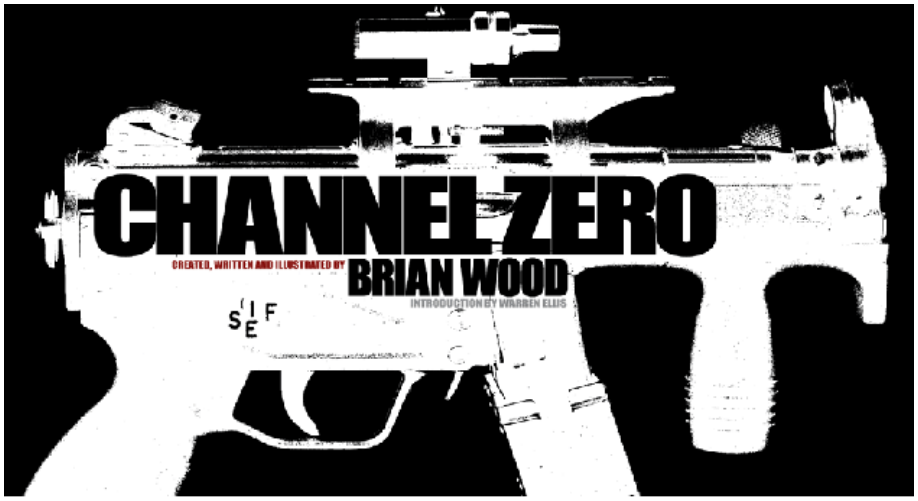
It's hard to say where it started, but the easiest answer is the Warren Ellis Forum and the writer's call-to-action/dare for everyone reading the WEF to express their love of comics through creation, whether those creations were comics, 'zines, or websites about comics. And it's not as if these things had never existed: the first comicbook fanzines appeared in the late '60s/early '70s, that movement spearheaded by none other than Roy Thomas. But when cranky old Warren Ellis spoke, people listened. The result was an explosion of new material. It was like a Big Bang of content: websites sprouted quickly, and those who ran them set to the task of bridging the gap between *Wizard* and *The Comics Journal*, and promoting good comics that had more than a fighting chance to appeal to non-readers.

Brian Wood

For many, Channel Zero topped the list. Published as individual issues by Image Comics in 1998, it didn't reach a wider audience until the 2000 collection from AiT/PlanetLar. And that audience freaking loved it. It quickly came to occupy the same space that books like The Sandman had done for years — highly cherished, heavily defended, and if you hadn't read it, you just weren't that cool. It was original, **blatantly prescient**, and ahead of its time. And it met several very important criteria for comics activists: self-contained and intelligent, with a female protagonist who absolutely destroyed comics stereotypes.

Channel Zero follows Jennie 2.5, a performance artist living in New York in the late 1990s, during the age of The Clean Act — a bill that whitewashes all media for a right-wing Christian audience and effectively isolates America from the rest of the world. Told exclusively from the perspectives of third-party narrators who are never revealed, Jennie 2.5 strikes

a one-woman revolution with pirate television broadcasts which eventually get higher ratings than the programs they interrupt. From beginning to end, it defies conventions of plot, dynamics, and storytelling, subverting the reader's expectations and consistently challenging them with its core message: DO SOMETHING.



Brian Wood

Written and drawn during Rudy Giuliani's nightmare term as King of New York, when media censorship, free speech violation, and police brutality seemed a daily occurrence, Wood honed *CZ* into the razored point of his anger and created his own language of dissent. Wood's skills as a propagandist are, for lack of a better word, ridiculous. Though he had a lot of room to develop as a sequential artist, he possessed enormous talents for design and iconography, and man could he turn a phrase.

Throughout *CZ*, a flickering stream of propaganda and anti-propaganda flashes by the reader, practically inspiring cognitive dissonance. *Trust your technolust. The truth is a wall. The truth is a concept. Progress backwards. Freedom is a virus. Your mind is a weapon. Use it*. In each issue, Wood included a page of copyright-free images that he encouraged readers to photocopy and turn into stickers, flyers, and t-shirts, and they're possibly the best pages in a great book. *Lost in Generica* written over a remote control. *Make them understand* and a video camera. *Make them listen* and a machine gun.

Brian Wood

It was unsurprising, then, that Wood went on to help define the aesthetic of comics activism. If it can be said to be an actual movement, then Wood is without a doubt its official propagandist. He provided the grenade design for one of the most-respected sites on comics criticism, artbomb.net, and t-shirts that quickly become iconic within the movement. The best (and one I still wear occasionally and get to feel punk rock) was black, with a white stencil of an AK-47, that simply said "Defend Comics."

The links between Wood, *Channel Zero*, and comics activism were apparent, even if unintended. When creating, Wood wasn't thinking of the survival of the medium or bringing new readers or new voices to the industry. He was thinking only of making his voice heard, of acting out in whatever way he could. (And graduating art school.) But these messages of awareness and activism, combined with its traits as a story, it's easy to see why Brian Wood and *Channel Zero* become so important to "the movement."

Over ten years later, we can look back on comics activism with a more-than-healthy level of cynicism. I did put "the movement" in quotes, after all. But even with that cynicism intact, it seems impossible to call the whole thing a failure. Comics survived, after all. Throughout the 2000s, the quality of work got better and better, readers become more informed, and the standard image of the comic book geek was amended to include the sort of coolness that the rest of the world seemed unconvinced of. Would Free Comic Book Day even exist if not for the clamor?

Brian Wood

It was a strengthening of the infrastructure, really. Maybe new readers were brought in to the fold, maybe not. Without a doubt, the existing fanbase grew stronger,

smarter, and more demanding. They read better comics, redirected their money from crap Big Two ongoings to smaller, more deserving books. The smaller books got bigger, and the creators of the smaller books got opportunities to write and draw big ones. Which is exactly why comics activism petered out. Like Jennie 2.5, many activists wanted to do their part and change things – and like Jennie 2.5, they were also in it for at least a little bit of fame, hopefully a bit more money. That's realpolitik; that's pragmatism.

But Jennie 2.5 got her Jennie Underground, and we got to read better comics. I'd call that a win for all of us.